

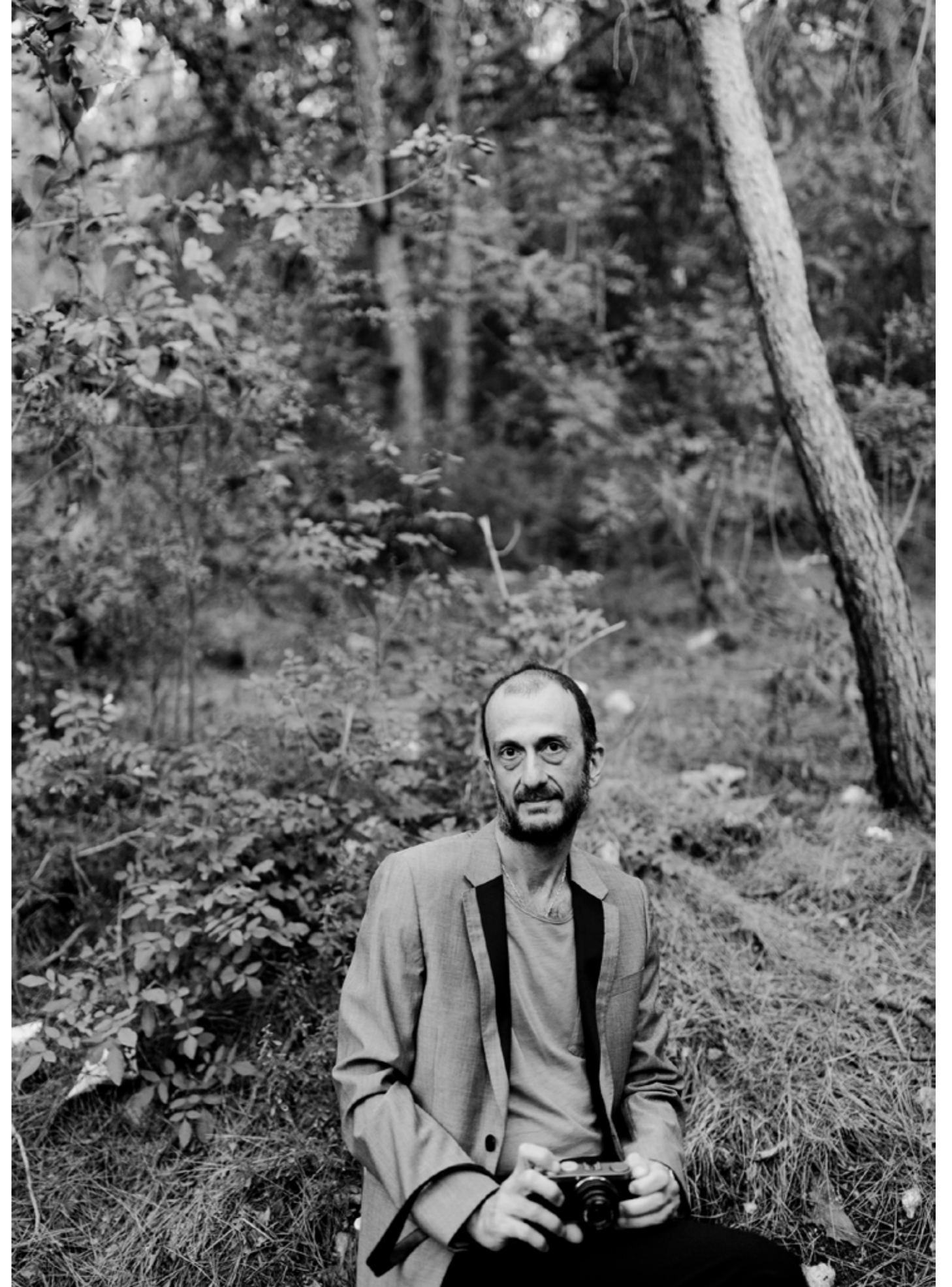
A CABINET OF  
BROKEN BODIES  
GREGORY BUCHAKJIAN

*Gregory Buchakjian (b. 1971) is an art historian and interdisciplinary visual artist. PhD graduate at Université Paris IV Sorbonne, he is director of the School of Visual Arts at Académie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts (ALBA).*

*Buchakjian's research deals with art in Lebanon, focusing on city and history with publications such as Fouad Elkoury, *Passing Time* (Beirut, Kaph Books: 2017), *Traversées Photographiques. Le Journal du Docteur Cottard* (Beirut, Arab Image Foundation: 2017) and Seta Manoukian, *Painting in Levitation* (Beirut, Kaph Books + Saradar Collection: 2018).*

*His exploration of abandoned dwellings and PhD dissertation generated the exhibition *Abandoned Dwellings, Display of Systems*, at Sursock Museum, Beirut, 2018, curated by Karina El Helou, and the book *Abandoned Dwellings, A History of Beirut* (Beirut, Kaph Books: 2018, Valerie Cachard, ed.). Also in 2018, his *Fragments from the Ridge Line* were in the Lebanese pavilion at the Venice Architecture Biennale and his *Fragments from the History of Civil Aviation in Lebanon* part of the *Works on Paper* accompanying the *Cycles of Collapsing Progress* exhibition in Tripoli.*

*Member of the advisory committee of the Saradar Collection and the publication committee at ALBA, he took part in juries including Sursock Museum Salon d'Automne (2009), Villa Empain's Boghossian Prize (2012), Beirut Art Center's Exposure (2013) and Beirut Art Residency (2017).*



Portrait of Gregory Buchakjian  
Photo credit Myriam Boulos

When the editors of Selections invited me to propose a contribution for their “Curated By” section, I wondered how to gather an Imaginary Museum – à la Malraux – of 10 to 15 artworks. Walking inside my family’s apartment while asking myself these questions, my gaze went towards two paintings by Assadour depicting distorted and reconstructed faces. These being among the first artworks I have ever seen in my life, they would provide a great starting point. For a very long time these canvases frightened me and for some reason, I associated them with war. Later on, not only did I accept to live with them, I became fascinated with Assadour’s fantastic universe populated with fragments and machines that converse with Paul Klee, Max Ernst, Giorgio de Chirico and Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis*. In the meantime, the name of Alfons Philipps became familiar to me. This German sculptor contributed to Beirut’s art scene in the 1970s and collaborated with theatre directors including Mounir Abou Debs, to whom I am related. Philipps seemed to proceed in the reverse way of Assadour, assembling instead of shattering. Thus, both were evocative of our mechanized world and its fragility. What appealed to me most was the idea of the scrap, which was the subject of *Le Corps en Morceaux* – the body in parts – an exhibition that took place a long time ago at the Musée d’Orsay. These apparatuses also evoked in my mind the “body without organs” that Deleuze and Guattari described as “not an empty body stripped of organs, but a body upon which that which serves as organs.”

In the 1970s and 1980s, Fadi Barrage framed heads, feet, hands, lungs, bones inside enigmatic, often tiny drawings expressing issues related to intimacy, anguish, illness and gender. At the same period, portions of female bodies appeared in the works on paper of Mohammad El Rawas. Rawas used collage from newspapers and magazines, stressing on the contrast between elegant fashionistas and disastrous warfare situation. At the same period, Samir Khaddage developed large-scale ghostly drawings inspired by scenes of violence, such as cadavers of warriors mistreated by their foes. In 1976, Rafic Charaf revealed the destruction of the city, its inhabitants and, more broadly, civilization, showing a horseman and an infantryman pulling their spears in the direction of a fragile statue reminding Picasso’s crying women. Picasso and his *Guernica* were also an inspiration for Dia Azzawi when he produced, in the aftermath of the Sabra and Shatila massacre, a large painting and a series of prints, *We Are Not Seen, But, Corpses*, accompanied by a text in which Jean Genet narrates the tragedy. During the first decade of this same conflict, Seta Manoukian assembled a masterful corpus of large-scale paintings telling the city’s suffering and survival before she immigrated to the United States in 1986. There, seeking to find a new equilibrium, she conceived decontextualized vertical/horizontal compositions populated by male figures, some seated or standing, who have found their centre, and others, floating or eventually plunging, who are not awakened and have no ground, no roots.

Beirut’s once lively city centre became a derelict uninhabited zone. In the middle of Martyrs’ Square, the bronze monument designed by the Italian sculptor Mazzucarati remained standing among ruins. In the 1990s, it was taken for restoration and replaced on site in 2004. The bullet holes were not repaired and one arm was missing. Said Baalbaki sculpted the missing hand, implying that the dismemberment is intentional and permanent, like an archaeological remain. Meanwhile, in 2000, during the Hamra Street Project initiated by Ashkal Alwan, Lamia Joreige invested the derelict Colisée Cinema to display *Replay*, a video installation composed of three screens and an open book, *La Guerre du Liban* (Images et Chronologies), Dar Al-Massira, 1978. Two photographs from the book were re-enacted in videos by two performers, a man and a woman. The woman keeps running, trying vainly to escape while the man is continually falling and dying.

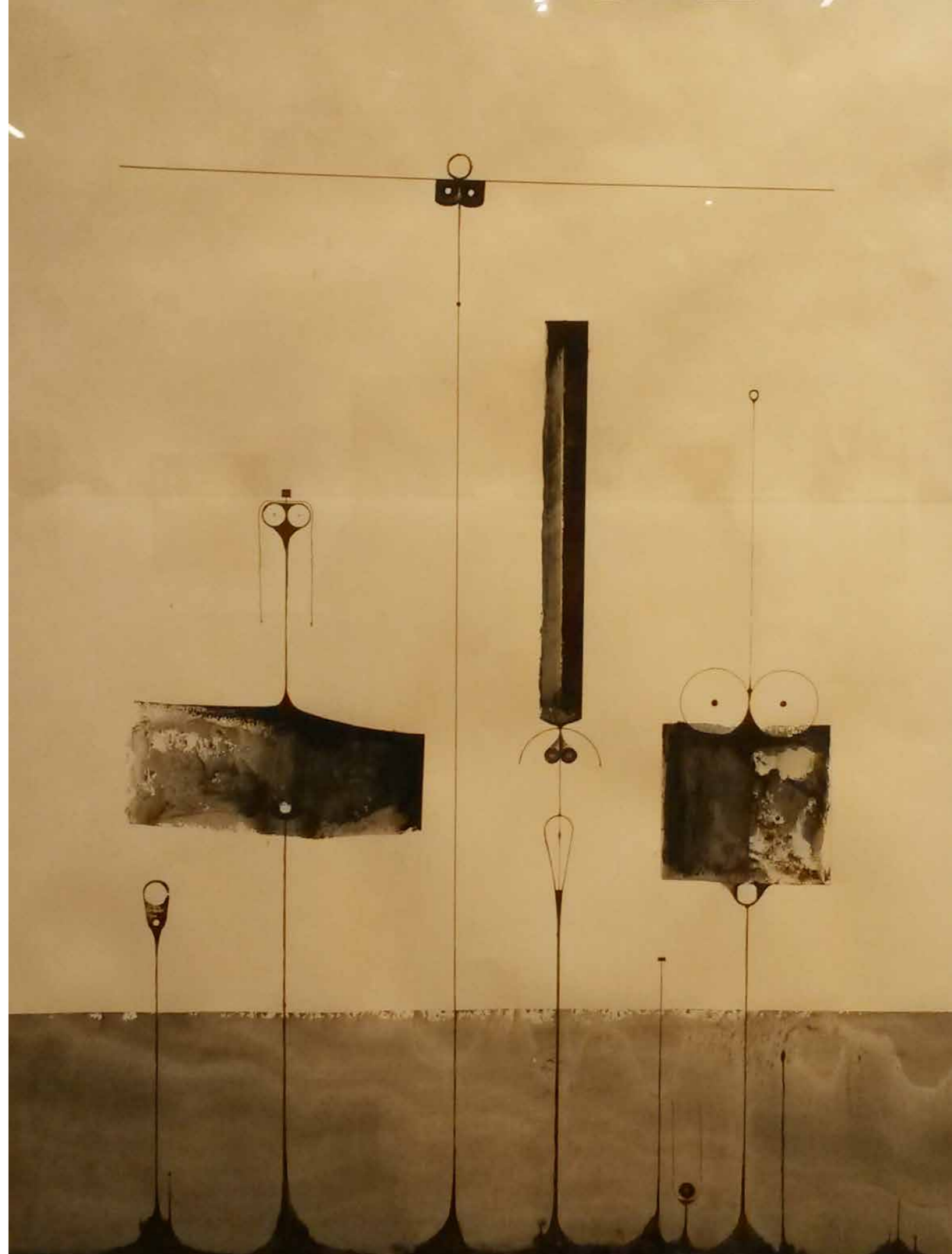
The question between the live and the dead, the body and the corpse have obsessed Shawki Youssef since he became an artist, in the 1990s. Youssef has drawn and painted hundreds of nudes that were so unidentified that the viewer couldn’t detect whether they were male or female and in which direction the artworks should be hanged. Recently, Youssef has introduced shapes of tables that provide a direction and a sense of stability. On and within these tables, the bodily remains are dispersed into ashes, strangely reminding Mona Hatoum’s 1983 performance *The Negotiating Table*.

Considering that the above-mentioned pieces refer to the human figure, Cynthia Zaven’s *Arsenal* stands as an outsider, the installation being a disassembled piano. Pianist and composer, Zaven sees the instrument, deprived of its primary function and mute, as a space for formal experimentation. Nevertheless, in the perspective of this curiosity cabinet, it entails at the same time an end-of-the-world atmosphere and a powerful sense of apotheosis.



Above - Assadour,  
Face, 1973. Oil on  
canvas, 22 x 27 cm

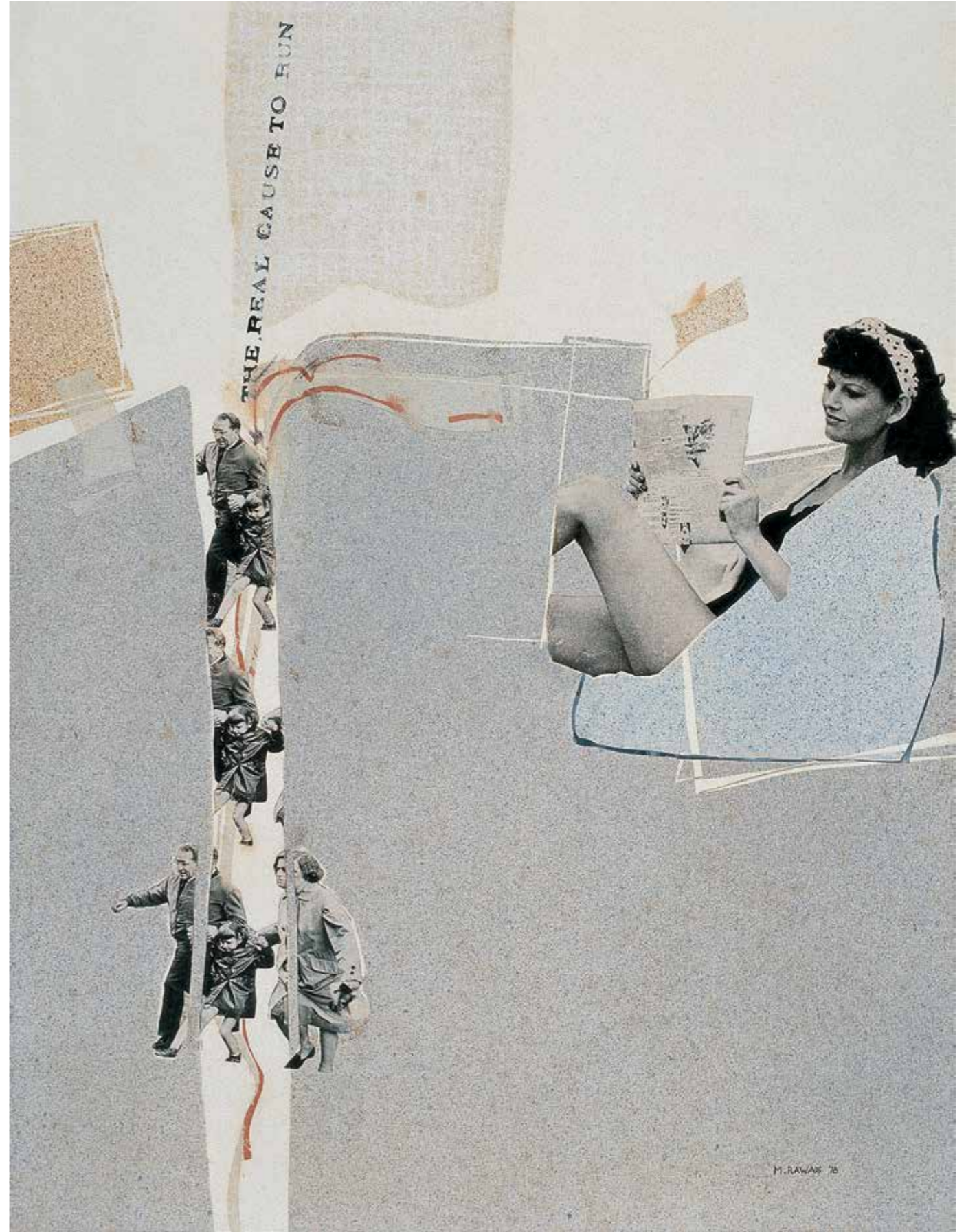
Right - Alfons Philipps,  
Drawing, 1974. Ink on  
paper, 65 x 47 cm



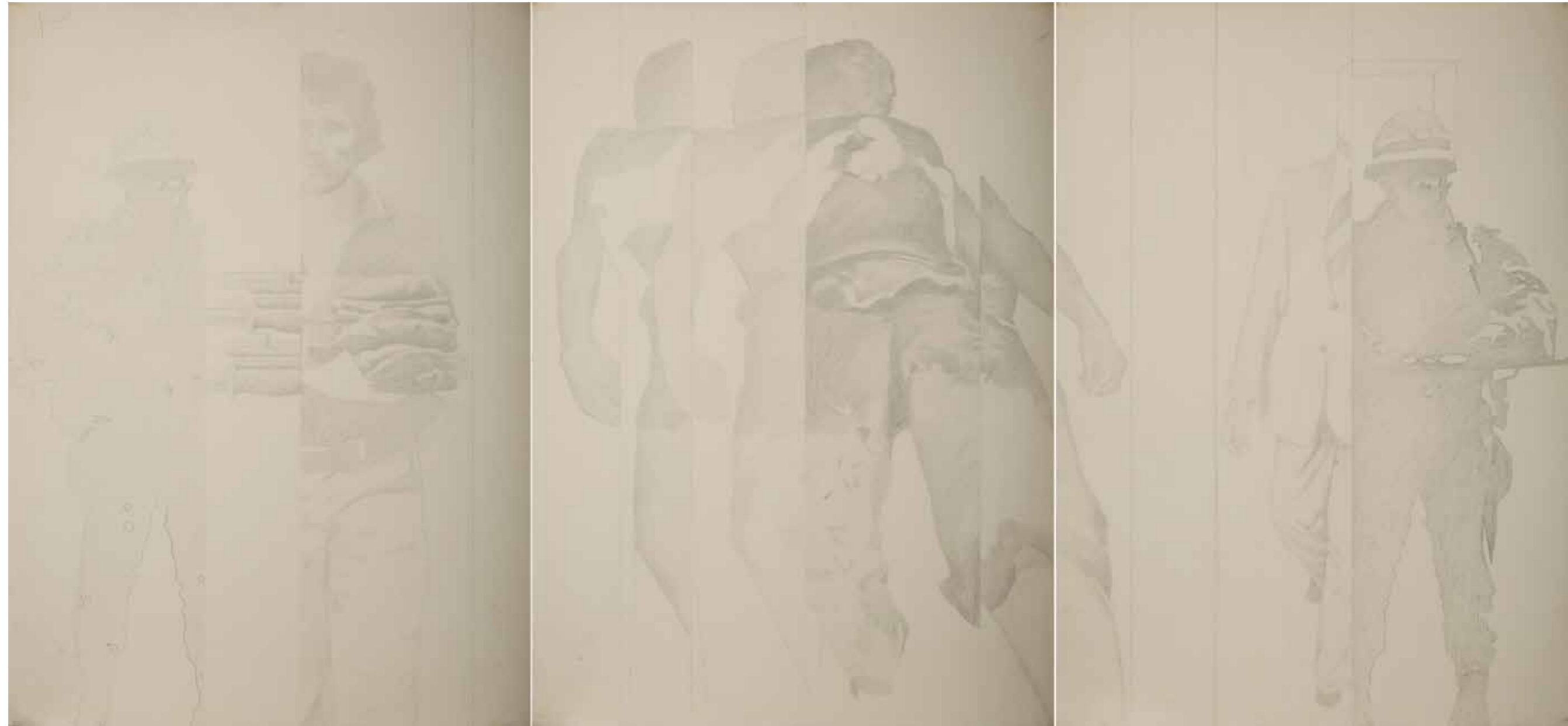


Left - Fadi Barrage,  
Untitled, 1987.  
Watercolor and  
gouache on paper,  
21.5 x 12.5 cm.  
© Fadi Barrage.  
Courtesy of Saradar  
Collection.

Right - Mohammad El  
Rawas, The Real Cause  
to Run, 1978. Gouache  
and collage on paper,  
63 x 48 cm.

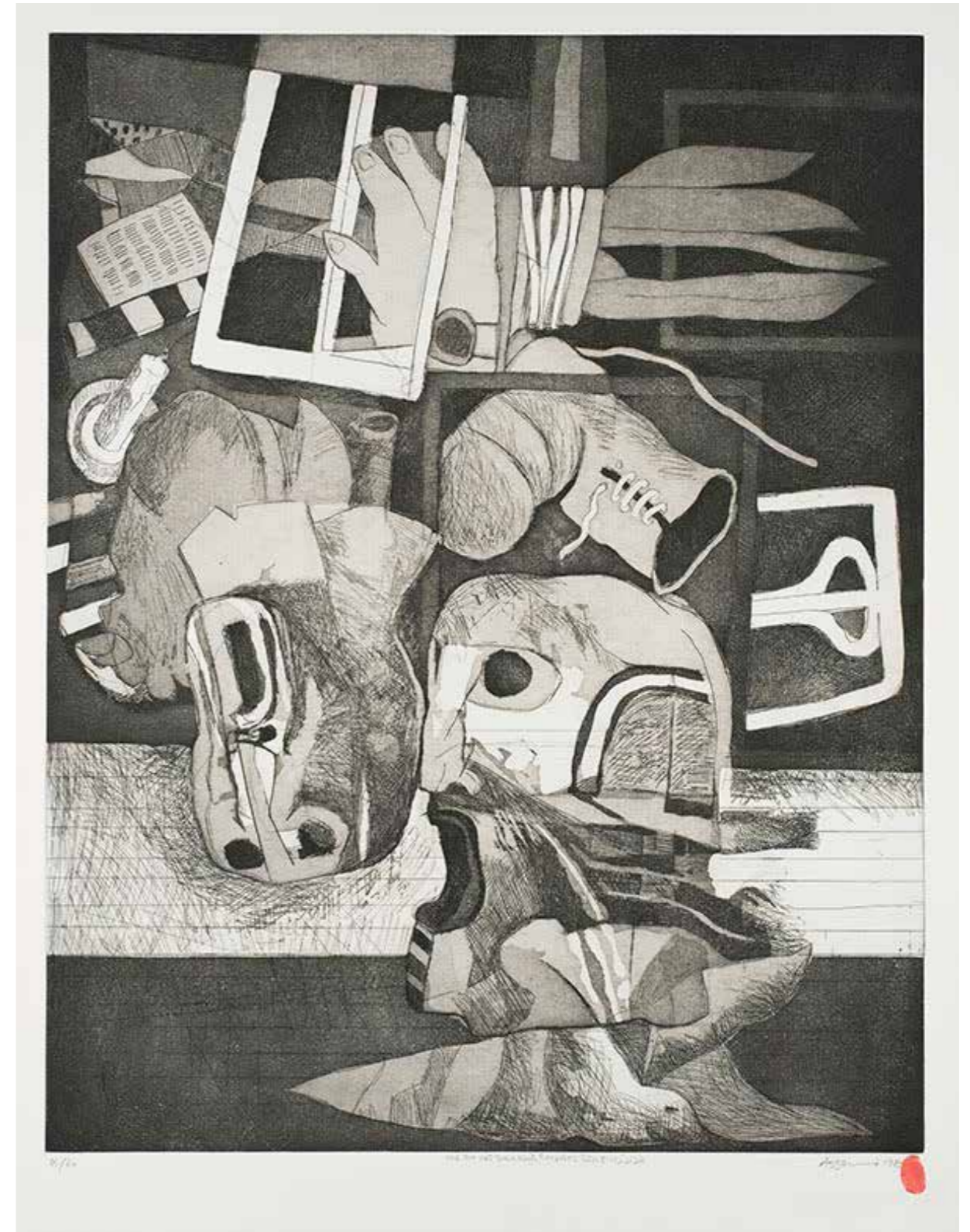
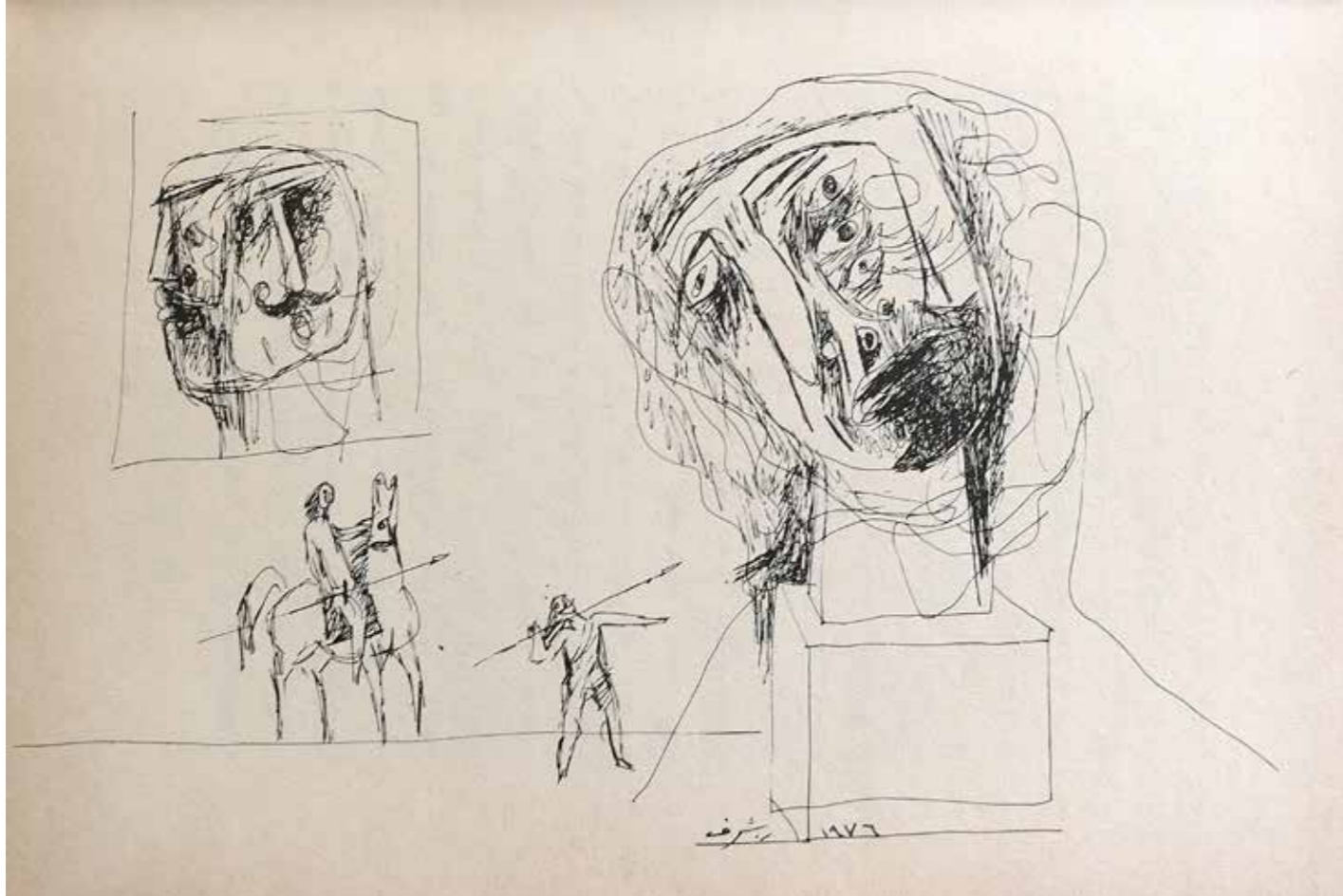


Samir Khaddaje,  
Untitled, c. 1978.  
Pencil on paper,  
3 x 98 x 70 cm.  
© Samir Khaddaje.  
Courtesy of Saradar  
Collection.



Opposite page - Dia Azzawi, We Are Not Seen But Corpses, 1982. Etchings with aquatint, 11 x 88.5 x 69 cm. © Dia Azzawi. Courtesy of Saradar Collection.

This page - Rafic Charaf, Untitled, 1976. Ink on paper, dimensions unknown, published in Kitab Rafic Charaf 1978-1979, Beirut, Dar al-Taliha, 1980, p. 29.





Seta Manoukian, *Very Serious*, 1988. Acrylic on canvas, 140 x 170 cm. Courtesy of Kaph Books



Said Baalbaki, One Hand Alone Can't Clap, 2010. Bronze, 90 x 30 x 15 cm. © Said Baalbaki. Courtesy of Saradar Collection.



Previous page - Lamia  
Joreige, *Replay*, 2000.  
© Lamia Joreige.  
Courtesy of Saradar  
Collection.

This page - Shawki  
Youssef, *'Nor Lunch,'*  
2019, Mixed media on  
paper, 101 X 70 cm.  
Photo by Gregory  
Buchakjian





Cynthia Zaven, Arsenal,  
2017. Disassembled  
upright piano, 205  
strings, soundboard, 88  
hammers, 67 dampers,  
56 white keys, 32 black  
keys, various wooden  
and metal parts. Photo:  
courtesy of the artist.